

Testimony from Bob Petti, Assoc. of Accredited Child and Family Agencies

IMPACT OF FAMILY TO FAMILY INITIATIVE

It is our impression that the approach to abuse / neglect situations have changed as a result of the state's Family To Family initiative.

Family To Family assumes that each child is immediately better off in a family setting. On the surface this assumption is easy to support, but in supporting it, there also has to be an assumption that these children are well adjusted and unaffected by their victimization. Just the opposite is true. The assumption ought to be that children entering care due to abuse or neglect have been traumatized, need careful assessment and need careful consideration for the meeting of future needs.

Family to Family assumes that interested relatives are the best placement option. Many times the relatives who are the most eager or willing to have children placed in their home exhibit the same lack of appropriate socialization as the family who is being investigated. Unfortunately, some are willing to ignore the seriousness of the situation, justify their family member's actions, allow those family members to move in with them or return the children to the investigated family. All FIA workers know of permanent court wards placed with relatives, where these relatives placed the children in on-going contact with parents whose rights had been terminated. How much more likely for this to occur when rights have not been terminated!

Family to Family prefers placement prior to assessment. This approach is like placing the cart before the horse! At the point of trauma (being removed from an unhealthy, hurtful environment), most children are best served in a neutral environment where expertise is used in assessing "the damage." Many children coming from neglectful environments have under developed socialization skills and often exhibit anti-social behavior. They respond with anger to their situations and this anger exacerbates their existing behavior problems. Immediate placement in a foster home does not permit the best possible match to occur for either a child or a foster parent. Some youth need the structure of a residential placement prior to placement into a foster home so that some appropriate behaviors can be developed.

Family to Family assumes multiple foster home placements are less harmful than residential placements. The frequency of foster home replacements impacts the degree to which a child is able or willing to bond in a family setting (including their own family upon return home or to a relative). A ten month residential stay would be preferable to a ten month multiple foster homes placement. A child entering foster care begins to make judgmental comparisons between his biological family and his foster family and then feels guilty doing so. In many cases this factor keeps the child from assessing his home life honestly as he feels a need to justify his parents' behavior out of loyalty to them. He also sees any attempts to make him change his behavior as a poor reflection on his parents, thus resists behavioral change also as a loyalty issue. Multiple foster home placements increase a child's sense of rejection and decrease a child's ability to trust care-giving adults. Residential programs offer the intense support services a child needs and wraps supervisory and milieu counseling around a needy child. This is something

Bob Petti

that a foster home can not do. Families making efforts to reunite with their children find themselves in competition with foster families, but while the child is in a residential setting, "going home" can be developed into an attractive goal.

Family to Family dismisses a child's need to grieve. The loss of family is devastating even if the family was dysfunctional. Placing a child in a relative's home often places the child at risk of being labeled as the reason for the family disruption. It is common in a divorce situation for a child to feel responsible and in a neglect / abuse situation this feeling is often exacerbated. The child's misbehavior and "need" for strict and physical punishment are proof to the relative that the child is at fault, not the parent. Often the relative feels a sense of obligation to minimize their family member's neglectful and abusive behavior. Placed in this predicament, the child is unable to grieve. When placed in a foster family, the child is expected to appreciate new parents, new siblings, new routines, and new material goods and thus is seen as unappreciative if he grieves for that which he has lost. It is difficult to understand how the child can grieve over the tattered, torn and hurtful family when the child welfare system has just provided them with a new and improved family! And yet, no adult having lost a spouse due to death replaces that spouse the very same day. First one has to grieve and the hurt feelings require time to subside.

Family to Family dismisses children's temperament. Some children are naturally more resilient than others. Even children sharing the same two parents and living in the same household may respond very differently to being removed from the home. Their response will impact their adjustment in another family setting. Family to Family assumes all children will respond more positively to a family setting than a residential treatment setting.

Family to Family assumes that failed post-residential placements mean the residential placements failed in their mission. It is unfairly assumed that children who are unsuccessful in foster care or relative placements following a residential placement were ill prepared for placement. While that may be true some of the time, it may be that the aftercare plan did not encompass meeting all the needs presented by the youth. The question should be asked, "If the youth was successful in a residential program, what did the family setting lack which resulted in placement failure?" Most residential programs can identify significant improvement in children socially, behaviorally and educationally within six to ten months. Why have the aftercare placements been unsuccessful in duplicating those gains?

Family to Family is assumed to be proven effective. A Specialized Foster Care Seminar was hosted by the Michigan Family Independence Agency on January 20, 2005 in Lansing Michigan. During this presentation, FIA's chosen presenter, William Meezan, DSW from the University of Michigan presented his paper The Evaluation of Treatment Foster Care: Conceptual Considerations. He commented that Family to Family will go the way of the Home Builders model. **There is no empirical proof supporting effectiveness!** Rigorous evaluations to prove effectiveness are not allowed by the Casey

Foundation who controls all the data. How can the state gamble on the welfare of children by making systemic changes based on unproven assumptions?

Therapeutic Foster Care is assumed to be proven effective. At the same seminar cited above, the topic of Treatment Foster Care: Current Best Practice, was presented by Andy Reitz PhD, Senior Consultant Child Welfare League of America, New England Office. Reitz specified that Treatment and Therapeutic Foster Care are the same thing. He stated that by nature of design, treatment foster care can not support large volumes of children. They accept one or two children at most. Sib-ship scenarios make this a difficult premise as does Michigan's numerical needs. Recruiting treatment foster parents is restricted by the number of biological children the parents currently have, the ability to remain on site 24 hours; the necessity of the parents possessing advance cognitive ability so that they can master the intensive requisite training and implement the needed therapeutic change; the no eject, no reject policy; and the requirement that parents learn and implement physical restraints when the child poses a danger to self or others. It appears that recruiting these parents in the numbers needed to substantially reduce residential care is extremely unlikely to happen.

Reitz stated that treatment foster homes focus on intensive behavioral modification interventions aimed at the return of the child to the birth home. The clientele is a teen or pre-adolescent delinquent child. However the treatment foster homes are being touted as a replacement for Shelters that service abuse/neglect youth not delinquents! FIA representatives appeared very surprised that their self selected speaker was bringing up issues which caused much consternation and indicate poor planning on the part of FIA.

Furthermore, Reitz states that Family to Family initiatives will not work in the volume needed given the unique qualities the family must possess. In addition to the barriers cited above, it is misguided to think that the child will reside in a therapeutic foster home in their community and attend their current school. There will not be enough therapeutic foster families to meet the children's needs adhering to the tenets of Family to Family.

Reitz also stated that Shelters and or Assessment Centers would still be needed. In fact they support a primary goal of a single placement. Reitz went on to comment that shelters and assessment centers are in use in several of the statements that are attempting to utilize treatment foster care. Shelter and/or assessment centers are crucial in allowing adequate time to stabilize and diagnose treatment issues, thus assuring a good match between caregiver and child. He stated that it is well documented that a child's manifested behavior is not readily observed during crisis. Children deserve time to stabilize in order to accurately assess and attend to their needs. Government should not allow children to be placed in haste in order to achieve arbitrary guidelines. Doing so, makes the likelihood of successful placement remote.

The most troubling statement he made was that therapeutic/treatment foster care has not been proven effective. The only established model is in Georgia. The program is copyrighted and thus must be purchased. The only study conducted was conducted by this agency on its own program. Similar to remarks made regarding the Casey

Foundation and Family to Family data; this program controls the data on therapeutic foster care and will not allow others to examine their data.

If Family to Family and Therapeutic Foster Care are indeed best practice, where are the unbiased studies to support this premise and why do the sole possessors of data for these approaches not allow others to examine the data?

We would also like to comment that Boilerplate 536 prohibits geographical assignment systems. We view Family to Family as a manipulative means to disregard this statutory language.

Currently the Privates First Law is not being implemented as designed. Delinquent youth are being placed in the public sector when there are empty beds in the private sector. We ask that the legislature look into this.

Lastly, we are concerned about the increasing trend to waive juveniles over to the adult corrections system. We fear that if the plan to drastically decrease the residential care network of programs is implemented, that these waivers will increase and do a disservice to Michigan's children.

SUMMARY

The issue of children of any age coming into care beyond their own immediate family is an extremely complicated one. Because the child's attachment to the parent becomes disrupted, the feelings of anger at the parent are transferred to the system that removes him from home and then onto the foster parent or agency that receives him. The Family to Family model fails to appreciate the full extent of children removed from their families. The child, often at first compliant and docile, will eventually treat the receiving people the same way he/she was treated in their home of origin. The quickened pace of assessment required in the Family to Family model fails to allow time for the child's true behavior to manifest. This leads to foster parents being ill prepared and ill informed to handle the child. This results in more frequent moves for the child which is against their long term best interest. The Family to Family model requires children with significant trauma to be placed in a family setting which exacerbates their reaction and is unable to meet their treatment needs. The model does not allow that residential care frequently provides the needed professional handling and provides the best initial transition prior to the child being thrust into a new family setting.

We believe that children should be placed in settings where there is the greatest likelihood that their cognitions can be understood and their needs met. The needs of these children that have been frustrated are beyond the comprehension of the average person. These children often have impaired social relations and need intensive residential treatment to improve their social skills. The concept of supplying the requisite treatment in anything less than a residential treatment program is ludicrous and is sacrificing our

children who are our future for short term financial savings justified underneath a web of treatment philosophy.

We would like to end this paper with a quote.

The two hundred-year history of American child welfare is littered with programs once hailed as reforms and later decried as harmful or ineffective, only to emerge again in the guise of new solutions to past failures (Bernstein, 2001).

We encourage state officials to examine this issue as discussions continue to eliminate or reduce residential treatment beds for neglect wards.